

Musgrave opposes transportation bill

JOHN HILL
Staff Writer

Limon Town Administrator Joe Kiely's mid-February trip to Washington, D.C., to meet with Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., elicited a spirited response from Musgrave.

Musgrave called the proposed bill to reauthorize the TEA-21, the transportation bill that funds the Ports-to-Plains project, among others, "an irresponsible solution to a complex problem" in a statement sent to *The I-70 Scout*.

Kiely said he traveled to Washington, D.C., to "remind [Musgrave] of the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor coalition and the federal funds Congress has appropriated throughout the route."

Kiely said Musgrave's commitment to "holding the line on gas tax indexing [and that] no general fund money will be used for transportation" places her among "the leaders against any change in funding for transportation."

Kiely said the difference between the \$250 billion proposed in the bill supported by Musgrave and Bush and the \$325 billion proposed in the Senate bill backed by Sen. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., will mean the difference between "everything stops [and] our infrastructure [will] fall apart" and completing the planned road improvements.

Kiely predicted that Congress might vote to extend the temporary bill instituted last year.

Musgrave said she sides with President George W. Bush, who has pushed tax relief and opposed an increase in the federal gasoline tax, which Musgrave said could cost a family an additional

\$135 at the pump per year.

Musgrave said the proposed bill "ignores viable alternatives in financing construction."

An alternative for funding more highway construction at lower costs is H.R. 2672, a bill Musgrave introduced to reform the Davis-Bacon Act, endorsed by 60 highway construction advocates, including Majority Leader Tom DeLay and Members of the Transportation Committee, she said.

Musgrave called the Davis-Bacon mandate "onerous" because it requires the so-called prevailing wage to be paid on federally funded highway projects.

Musgrave and Bush support a bill that appropriates about \$250 billion for transportation and gives states the option to remove the provision, allowing the market to dictate wages.

The Heritage Foundation estimated the legislation Musgrave supports might lower the cost of highway construction by \$16 to \$20 billion over the next six years.

"In addition, estimates by the Associated Builders and Contractors indicate inflated wages raise construction costs by 5 to 15 percent and as much as 38 percent in rural districts," she said.

Musgrave advocates alternatives to build roads at lower costs, including pursuing gas tax evaders, creating additional tolling authorities, bonding, using state infrastructure banks, and ending government's spending transportation funding for other purposes.

"Rep. Mark Kennedy's Fast Act legislation, for instance, would provide an estimated \$50 billion in transportation funding by allowing for temporary tolling on newly constructed interstate

lanes," Musgrave said. "The fees collected would be dedicated to paying for the construction of that particular interstate. Once the project is paid off, the fee collection would end. This is an innovative idea that can generate real money and can make a real difference, without raising taxes."

Musgrave said bonding to generate construction funds and reduce inflationary costs is a feasible alternative, listing Colorado as an example.

Musgrave recommended expanding the state infrastructure bank pilot program to establish banks that provide low interest rate loans to private companies and local governments to fund transportation projects.

Musgrave said the strategy of increasing the gasoline tax would be bad politics.

"Republicans are the party of lower taxes," she said. "With the Democrats winnowing their field down to John Kerry, a big-taxing liberal that has a history of raising the gas tax, why would Republicans want to give him a free pass by proposing our own gas tax hike? The current tax hike proposal sends the wrong message to America's highway users: Congress prefers to simply raise taxes rather than investigating other alternatives."

The politician who took the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor proposal to Washington recently said he is optimistic that the trade route will make "great progress" in its second term of operation.

Rep. Randy Neugebauer, R-Texas, said at the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor annual meeting the project benefits from "great leadership" and the commit-

ment of elected officials, department of transportation workers, and engineers in three countries and several states.

Neugebauer was chairman of the Policy Advisory Committee for the Metropolitan Planning Organization and worked with the Texas Department of Transportation and the U.S. Department of Transportation in completing the proposal to link Laredo, Texas, to Denver and support the development of the trade route by achieving federal designation.

He was chairman of the coalition from its inception in 1998 until his appointment to Congress.

He became a representative from the 19th District in June 2003 and serves on the House committees on agriculture, science and resources.

Neugebauer credited the "strong coalition of communities (who) set a common goal (and produced) one of the top and most organized transportation corridors in the country today. What a difference a year makes."

The coalition will build the route "one brick at a time," he said.

Neugebauer said he was confident the appropriations bill would pass the House and Senate and said the Congress might "pass a historic energy bill" that could eliminate the 5.25-cent tax advantage of ethanol over gasoline to produce \$2.2 billion that could be moved into the transportation fund and "offset" part of the need for an additional \$60-110 billion to fund the project for another six years.

Although the funding dilemma has put the Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor coalition "behind the curve," Neugebauer believes Congress will "bring forward the reauthorization in early 2004.